Chapter 1: Night 1, Part 1

Well…there was no denying it. As much as he didn't want to admit it, to swallow his pride, to let go of his pride and admit that he had made an error, there was just no avoiding the truth any longer.

He was lost.

A strong snort of frustration escaped from his lungs, blowing twins streams of smoke from his nostrils. Of course, he would be lost. As if all that had already happened wasn't enough, all the inconveniences and frustrations that had been riddling his day, it just had to throw one final insult on top of the pile. Just his luck today, he supposed; he didn't recognize this part of the forest at all.

In fact, he wasn't even sure if this was part of Feywild Forest.

In the dark of the night, he slinked down the open path that weaved its way through the trees, pausing every now and then to observe his surroundings. Nothing about this place felt familiar to him at all. The grass was long and wet, extending from the earth like reeds in a swamp, while the ground was slightly muddy and soft, littered with dead leaves. The trees were dark in color and looked almost dead, despite being full dark-green leaves, which were so thick and packed together that the canopy completely blocked out any light from above, to the point he couldn't tell if it was day or night. A heavy fog, the source of the moisture, lingered in the air, reducing normal visibility to almost nothing. And in the distance, the ominous sounds of insects singing in the night and crows cawing in the branches filled the air.

Then there was the aura of death that hung from everything.

Normally, when he walked through lands full of living beings, be they plants, animals, or otherwise, he could feel the life-force radiating from them; an aura of sorts that filled the air, bringing a sense of life to the world. It was especially strong in Feywild, where magic flowed through everything, radiating like the glow of bioluminescent mushrooms.

Here? There was no such life.

Everything felt *dead.* From the trees to the grass, nothing felt alive; they were just being there, sitting there like rocks or other inanimate objects, even if they were green and tall. Even the very air was still and stiff, like the air inside a long-abandoned cave. The sounds of animal cries and insect song didn't sound right either; like something that was once these things still trying to pretend it was.

It wasn't right.

He would know; he was the one who dealt with things that weren't right, after all.

His large frame and towering height made the lower-hanging branches of the trees bend and break as he pushed his way through them, his dorsal spines and horns tearing through the underside of the canopy and ripping out entire clumps of leaves. His long, heavy tail swished from side to side behind him as he walked, leaving long grooves in the dirt along with his large, four-toed footprints. His wings shifted against his sides, kicking up a small gust of wind that sent some of the drier leaves fluttering in the wind. All the while a pair of fiery gold and purple eyes pierced through the dark and the fog, like twin stars lighting up the night sky; he paused to look around, a deep, guttural growl rumbling from his throat and scaring the nearby crows into the air. He paid them no mind and continued on his path…or what he thought was his path; for all his senses, his abilities to see and feel the world around him, it was hard to get his bearings in this place.

He went by many names and many titles, some good and some bad: The Lord of Time, the Thane of Nimh, the Heir of Gojira, and the Primal God of Vengeance were but a few he had earn over his long lifespan. But his best-known title was his name: Jendovahzoor.

Or as those who were close to him called him: Spyro the Dragon.

And he was not happy, and being lost was the least of his frustrations.

The day behind Spyro had been nothing short of a complete and utter disaster, and he was at the end of his rope. It started well enough, but it was quickly ruined by many factors. Missing out on lunch, fighting off a number of predators that had gotten too close to Thane Hall, a mess of negotiations between the Rodentkin and the Felidae (something Zoe had predicted would be a disaster), dealing with Jenner's bullshit, and screwing up his afternoon hunt of prey. And now, to top it all off, he had gotten lost on the way back home.

Something that should've been impossible. He was, after all, a dragon, a creature with an infallible sense of direction and homing instincts. They were capable of finding their way across entire worlds, their journeys spanning thousands of miles. And yet he found himself wandering through these strange, non-alive woods. He was certain he had been heading in the right direction before.

It was as if he had stepped off the map and into a brand-new world completely.
A cold wind blew through the forest, blasting against his scales with the cold dampness of the fog. Spyro growled as he tucked his wings against his sides in a futile attempt to block out the cold. This was beyond enraging; he was lost, cold, hungry, and completely and utterly done with this damnable day. All he wanted right now was to get home, eat something from his mother's cooking, and finally put the day behind him with a good night's sleep. But from the looks of things, it looked like that wouldn't be the case. It looked like it was going to be a night in a cold, hard cave…if he could find one…

He was just about to break down and throw a fire-breathing fit when a sudden noise reached his webbed ears: the sound of rusty metal creaking, like someone was opening an old door. His eyes glowed brighter as he focused his vision into the dark and fog, and soon he spotted it: There, standing tall and imposing amongst the trees, was a large wall of stone, almost as tall as he was, that stretched on to his right until it reach its corner in the distance, while to his left he found a large stone gateway just a few yards from his position. Ebony iron gates with ornate points, gleaming at the sharpened tips that promised any jumpers a piercing fate. One of the doors was waving in the wind, the source of the rusty creaking. A pair of small gargoyles sat on the support pillars; each had the face of a rat with angry eyes and a wicked grin.

Very ominous looking, but Spyro and his current state of mind couldn't care less; finally, a sign of civilization. Perhaps the entrance to a village? Or at the very least an old mausoleum he could take shelter in? He wasn't picky at this point; as much as he would rather be back home, he needed to find a place to stay fast, before the cold got any worse. That, and it would be much easier to find his way back home during the day.

Wasting no time he turned towards the gateway, his long tail swishing in the grass behind him, and made his way to it. His larger size made it a bit difficult for him to fit through the entrance, but he managed to squeeze through without damaging the stone. He could've just jumped over the wall, he realized afterwards. Oh well; he was through now, regardless of how.

But once he looked up to see what was beyond said wall, the light coldness of dread filled his Stomach.

Tombstones. Dozens of them. They covered the landscape before him in a mass graveyard, lining each side of a path that led further in. He took a hesitant step forward, looking down at the nearest tombstone to his right; there was nothing carved into it. No names, no final words, nothing. An unmarked grave, barely worth the rock that had been placed at its head. He looked up to see that many of the graves were of the same kind; nameless souls that passed on without anything to remember them by; some were crosses carved from stones, while others were barely the rocks that had been picked out for carving.

Completely forgotten to the world, with no one to remember them.

What a miserable state…

His musing on these stones was broken when the soft glow of a distant light shone in his peripheral vision, drawing his attention away from the lonely graves. He turned his gaze to look up the path through the graveyard to see a pair of firelights flickering in the dark. A small glimmer of hope rose in his chest; fire was a telltale sign of someone being around here. Someone had to keep the fire alight, after all. He shook his head in an animalistic manner to shake away the dread of being surrounded by tombs and made his way up the path;

his tail brushed against tombstones as it swung back and forth, breaking some and knocking a few over.

He continued up the path until he finally reached the source of the lights, and what he found caught him off-guard. There, standing in the middle of the graveyard's plot, was an old but massive two-story building, standing taller than he was; possibly a manor from the sheer size of it. The walls were made of dirty brown bricks, covered in the greens of moisture and mold, as if they hadn't been tended to in years. Several windows could be seen in the walls, all closed with wooden shutters, yet each strangely sporting a different color of wood. The front doors were large, with stone steps leading up to it, and two large candles on each side (the source of the lights that had drawn him in); each door had a metal symbol of a skull with large mousey ears next to the handles. And finally, the feature that stood out the most, was the large metal letters that had been bolted into the wall just above the door frame, spelling out the words 'GREGORY HOUSE'.

Spyro cocked his head to the side in confusion, a guttural croon rumbling through his lower jaw. What in the name of Frith was this building doing in the middle of this forest? Did someone live here? There had to be someone, due to the lit candles. Why would they build such a place so far away from the rest of the world, and in the middle of a graveyard no less? So many questions, and all of them gave him a heavy sense of unease.

Another gust of wind blew through the air, catching him off guard; the frigid bite of cold brushed against his scales again, and he shivered from it, tucking his wings back against his sides again. It didn't matter; all these questions and concerns could wait for another day. Right now, all he wanted to do…needed to do was to get out of this wretched cold, and right now he didn't care how.

So, without a second thought, he lifted one of his hand-paws and gave a gentle (by his terms) knock on the doors in front of him. The sharp knocking echoed through the stillness of the graveyard, prompting some crows to caw in response…and for a moment, it was the only response it got. He gave a frustrated croon that rattled in his throat, reaching up and knocking again, slightly harder this time.

"*I'll be there in a moment!*" A voice called out from behind the doors. Spyro blinked in surprise; so, there was someone here after all. The voice was male, if a bit raspy and high-pitched. The voice of a person who was getting on in his years but still had a bit of spring to their step.

He waited for a few more seconds before there was the click of a key turning a lock. Then the door slowly creaked open with an ominous groan of wood, revealing the one who had opened it.

He was a rat. Or to be more precise, a rat rodentkin, like Justin and Nicodemus, although he was a little short for a rat rodentkin; closer to the size of a mouse rodentkin, not much bigger

than Spyro's mother. He was an old rat, and it showed: his fur was a sickly gray color, while the hair that grew from his head was a light sandy-blonde, matted and stringy from age. His face was covered in wrinkles and liver spots, his tail was crooked and bent in places, and his large magenta-colored eyes were misaligned from each other; all signs of just how old he was. His outfit consisted of a red-and-black striped sweater and black pants under a long pink overcoat.

A rather peculiar, if creepy-looking, creature.

"Why hello there, my friend." The rat greeted him as he opened the door, holding a candle in one hand. "Would you like a roo-*GEH?!*" Said candle fell out of the rat's now-shaking hands, the copper holder clattering against the stone stairs, as he recoiled at the sight of Spyro, his mismatched eyes going wide with fright.

From the rat's perspective, which had to look upwards quite a bit, he was standing before a massive saurian that had six limbs in total: four legs and a pair of wings, the latter protruding from his shoulders. His hind-legs were saurian in nature, complete with a digitigrade ankle structure and four-toed bird-like feet, while his forelegs were outright primate in build, complete with five-fingered hands with one being an opposable thumb; both fingers and toes were tipped with sharp, curved claws, obviously used for slashing prey. The dinosaur-like tail was incredibly long, twice the length as the rest of him, while his wings were large and bat-like, with four long fingers lined with a fiery-orange skin membrane and a single clawed thumb on each of the wing's 'hands'. His underbelly was lined with overlapping gold-colored scale-plating from chin to tail-blade, while the entire length of his spine was covered in hundreds of long dorsal spines that looked sharp enough to pierce through metal, the longest lining the back between his wing-shoulders and the thickened end of his tail, turning the latter into a deadly weapon. His neck was long and snake-like, yet thick and strong to support his head, which was more like a prehistoric dragon's than a traditional dragon's in appearance: outright saurian in structure, with a theropod-like snout and jaws, forward-facing eyes, bony eyebrow-ridges, a pair of backward-facing horns that curved upward in an S-shape from the back of his head, under which several smaller horns and chin spikes lined the back of his head and jaws. His eyes glowed with a fiery light in the dark, blazing pools of bright gold and magenta-purple with snake-like slit pupils.

Spyro frowned a bit in confusion, before he suddenly realized what was wrong, his eyes widening with realization. He was still in his larger True Form; the form of a giant Aetherian Safi'jiiva that towered over the Rodentkin of Nimh. He hadn't even bothered to change his form to knock on the doorway that was much too small for his current size, his fist alone being almost as big as the doors.

The rat didn't say anything more; all that came out of his shaking form was a jabbering of nonsensical sounds, trying desperately to find something to say that would spare him the wrath of the massive beast before him.
Whoops.

"***My apologies.***" Spyro said in his normal form's telepathic voice; a voice that thrummed with the deep rumble of an earthquake and crackled with the growl of a blazing forest fire, doing the poor old rat no favors in calming down. The dragon sighed, taking a step back from the building. "***Give me a moment.***"

He then closed his eyes and summoned the power within him; said power formed into the world in the form of purple-and-orange flames, billowing harmlessly off his body until he was completely engulfed in a roaring flurry of fire; the flames appeared to coil their tongues around his saurian form, as if he was being wrapped up tightly in large blankets, as if to squeeze him tight...which they appeared to do; the tighter they grew, the more his form began to grow ever smaller, all the while his sheer, overwhelming aura of his draconian presence began to drain from the very world around him. It continued this way until his size was only slightly larger than the rat before him.

Then, with a flash of his wings expanding outwards, the flames burst open and dispersed into the air, fading as the magic keeping them alive was dispelled from existence. And when they did, they revealed a dragon that had not only shrunk to a much smaller size but had changed drastically in form: what was once a beast as big as the building itself was now a smaller creature, only a head taller than the rat when standing on all fours. He had turned into a smaller, smoother, and less-intimidating version of his previous form, with larger eyes, smoother scales, an outright-pleasant face, a frill of yellow on his head, a golden tail blade at the end of his tail, and so forth; he looked outright like a small, almost-cartoony version of his true self. What was also gone was the sheer presence of draconian power that had previously engulfed the entire area, all of it subdued and hidden away this tiny new form, leaving no one the wiser.

"Does that help?" He asked, this time in a physical voice that came from his lips and sounded much more like a normal mortal's voice.

The old rat stared at Spyro for a moment with a silent look of awe, yet not as great in scope as most people who had viewed his transformation abilities would usually do. Then, suddenly snapping out of his trance, the rat shivered violently with a loud exclamation.

"Y-Yes, yes! It does!" He exclaimed, gathering himself. "Do forgive me! I was just taken aback, is all!" He knelt down to gather up his dropped candle, scooping up the wick back into the holder. "I must say, you're quite the imposing presence!"

"Yeah, I get that a lot." Spyro admitted, rubbing the back of his head with his wing. "Sorry about that."

"O-Oh, it's no problem at all, I assure you, my friend!" The rat assured him, placing the candle back into its holder. "This is quite a surprise for sure: we've never had a dragon come to Gregory House before."

Spyro took a pause at that. "…I take it you're Gregory, then?"

"I am." The rat, now confirmed to be Gregory, said. "And this is my Hotel."
That got the dragon to blink in surprise. This place, a hotel? In the middle of this Frith-forsaken forest? How and why would anyone build a tavern of any kind out here? It didn't seem like a path that was often travelled.

He was pulled out of his questions by a final gust of wind that blew harder than the others, causing the candles on either side of the doors to dance wildly; the biting cold returned with a vengeance, and the dragon shivered from it.

"Oh my! That was a cold one!" Gregory exclaimed as he drew his arms in close, trying to preserve heat. "This cold will be the death of both of us if we stay out here!" He stepped back into the doorway and ushered Spyro to follow. "Do come in and warm yourself, will you? Gregory House is open to all weary travelers, no matter the species."

Spyro sighed with relief. "Thank you very much." He said as he followed the old rat inside, finally stepping out of the cold and into Gregory House.

He didn't even notice the doors closing on their own behind him.

The inside of the building was much nicer than the outside.

Spyro sighed with relief as the cold faded from his bones; it wasn't exactly warm in the lobby of the house by any means, but it wasn't cold either. Just a middle, for lack of a better term. It was an escape from the elements outside, and that was all the dragon needed right now. He took a wide stance and shook his body from side to side, in the same manner a dog would do when drying itself off, flapping his wings and flicking his tail afterwards.

Then he took a good look around himself; of the place he would be spending the night.

The lobby of Gregory House spanned two floors, opening up to a large open-ceiling lobby. The central part had a seating area with two sofas and a table in the middle, while the north side of the room had a set of two stairs on either side which would take anyone up to the second floor. Under the balcony of said floor, between the two stairs, was another double-door with the sign 'Dining Room' above them, while another door on the second floor had the sign 'Bar' to its side. The east side of the room had the Manager's Office, a door which led to the western hallway, and the front desk; it was at this front desk where Gregory had made his way to in preparation to sign his newest guest in. On the wall across from the front desk, on the western side of the room was a photo of the house's layout, showing both floors in full detail, while past it was two final doors: the first one led into the western hallway, while the the second one had the golden sign 'Gregory Horror Shop' bolted on it.

"I'm going to need your name to get you signed in, my friend." Gregory voice broke through the silence. Spyro turned his head to see the old rat had taken a seat behind the front desk and was flipping through the pages of a large book; a ledger, if Spyro had to guess.

The dragon turned his body to face the desk, stepping up to the desk. "Spyro."

Gregory cocked an eyebrow at that. "Spyro? That's a rather short name for a dragon." He commented simply, picking up his pen.

Spyro shrugged his wings. "It's what I prefer." He said simply.

The old rat shrugged "No judgement here…not by me, anyway. Hmm hmm hmm…" He followed that statement with a small chuckle.

That gave Spyro paused: the way Gregory chuckled like that…something about it set alarm bells off in his head. It was just flat-out ominous, like the rat was anticipating something happening…something bad. Like he was in on a cruel joke that he and he alone was privy to. It made his dorsal spines rattle with agitation.

There was the scratching of the quill against paper as the name was signed in. "Alright then! You're all signed in." Gregory told the young dragon as he closed the ledger. "I'll show you to your room."

Spyro blinked. "But I haven't paid yet."

Gregory waved him off with one hand, using the other to re-light his candle with a lit match. "That's quite alright, my friend." He assured him, waving the match to put it out. "I can tell you're exhausted from your journey. We can work out the payment in the morning." He stepped out from behind the desk, candle in hand. "Right this way."

Another sense of something being wrong tugged at Spyro's mind. What kind of tavern allowed those staying to pay after they slept? In the end, though, he simply decided to push the feeling to the side and follow the old rodent towards the door that led to the west hall. Right now, he was too tired to focus on the questions.

All we wanted to do now was put this wretched day behind him.

The house was quiet…too quiet, as cliché as that sounded. Apart from the squeaking of the floor beneath their feet as they traveled down the hall, the place was just incredibly silent. Even with Spyro's super-strong sense of hearing, he couldn't make out anything other than that. Nothing to indicate this hotel was inhabited by anyone.

Again, the reason it would be out in the wilderness, so far from the rest of rodentkin civilization, was a question that continued to gnaw at the dragon's mind.

The rooms they passed were quite numerous, though he figured that was to be expected from a hotel of this size. Each had numbers forged from a golden metal (though it wasn't gold, based on the smell) nailed into them; some of the doors were a faded magenta in color, and others a dark turquoise. Each had a placard bolted to the side of each doorway; these placards had names written on them, along with images that seemed to be related to these names.

Some of these names were normal enough, while others were rather peculiar. More residents, perhaps? If so, he didn't sense them at all.

Then they passed by something that made him stop, his eyes widening in surprise.
The door they were currently at was something else entirely; a massive steel door, like something out of a human's maximum-security prison, complete with a small mail-slot of food and doorframe forged of metal nailed into the wall. The metal itself was slightly worn from age, and a bit rusty around its edges. On top of that, there were heavy-duty chains crisscrossed the door, locking it up even further. No number or name-plate was to be found for it, either.

Gregory noticed that he had stopped, pausing himself to turn to look back. "Is something the matter?" He asked.

"This door…it's different from the others." Spyro said numbly, still transfixed by it. "…is there a reason for that?"

“Oh, that…” Gregory clicked his tongue at the door. “I suppose that must be quite the eyesore, hmm? Well, you see, that door in particular is home to a particularly gruesome beast.” He turned all the way around, approaching Spyro and the door. “Something that has been giving the hotel and I quite a lot of trouble. Shame, really: he used to be such a timid and gentle creature…but now, he’s become a great danger to not only everyone, but himself as well.” He gave a small tug to one of those chains, as if to test it. It rattled hard enough to ring in Spyro’s ears.

It was then that Spyro noticed that, while the rest of the door looked ancient, those chains were far more pristine in condition. Almost *brand new*.

"So, it's under my careful watch that he remains here, guarded, and more importantly, safe." His good eye fell towards the dragon. "Rest assured, I take only the utmost precaution to keep our guests safe from harm."

Spyro cocked an eyebrow. "You keep a monster in here? In your hotel?"

"Better in here than out there, where he could hurt somebody." Gregory stated simply, turning away and resuming his walk down the hall. "There's no need to worry yourself; he's not a threat to anyone…not anymore. Hmm hmm hmm hmm…"

Spyro frowned, his shackles rising. That chuckle again; every bit as ominous and untrustworthy as it was the first time he heard it. What was he even laughing about this time? What hidden joke could he possibly have about this? About a monster in the hotel…unless it *wasn't* a monster behind that door.

And if not a monster, then *what?*

Eyes narrowed in suspicion, he turned away from the door and continued to follow the rat down the hall.

"Perhaps I'll tell you the full story later, if you catch me in the right mood." Gregory continued, coming to a stop near the door next right to the steel one. "In the meantime, this will be your room, my friend."

Spyro looked up at the door before him; it was a simple wooden door, just like the many others they had passed on the way to this one. The one thing that made it stand out from the others was the large golden numbers '101' hanging above a placard with the words 'Guest Room' on it.

With a heavy click of a key, the door was unlocked and then it creaked open; grinning, the old rat stepped aside and motioned for him to enter. "I'm sure you'll find it to your liking." Much to Spyro's surprise, the room itself was actually quite nice. Along the south wall was a large, comfortable-looking bed, while along the north wall was a bookshelf with a cabinet beneath it, a coffee table with a vase on it, and a reading desk where a single candle cast a warm light throughout it. The window was closed shut with heavy shutters, though the faint whistling of winds could be heard whispering through the cracks in the wood.

"It's nice." Spyro commented as he stepped inside.

Gregory chuckled his creepy laugh again, though this time the dragon made sure to keep his reaction hidden.

"Glad to hear it." The rodent said with an eerie smile, stepping back from the doorway. "Now, if you need anything or have any concerns, don't be afraid to ask the front desk. I do hope you'll enjoy your stay." And with that Gregory closed the door, leaving Spyro to himself.
It was only thanks to his super-strong sense of hearing that he was able to pick up one final word:

"*Forever.*"

He turned his head to look back at the door with widened eyes, a brief moment of shock and just a touch of dread coming over him like another gust of icy-cold wind. He had been trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut, so relieved to be out of the cold that he didn't pay it

any mind, but now that he was alone it was all he could hear: his draconic instincts were fully alert, making him feel as if his very life was in danger.

He didn't know what this place was, or what this 'Gregory' wanted with him, but between the aura of death hanging about the forest, the strange eeriness of this hotel, the uneasy presence of the old rat, the odd feeling behind that bolted steel door, and that last single word, an idea of what it could be was beginning to form in his mind.

This place…this 'hotel'…it wasn't right. He could sense it all around him. Taste it in the air. Feel it in his bones.

There was something very amiss of this place…something *evil.*
…

Fine.

The feeling of shocked dread was replaced with indignant fury, his eyes narrowing as they began to glow a golden orange in the dim light of his room. A deep, gurgling growl bubbled from his throat, which itself was starting to glow with a dangerous fire, shining through the grooves of his scales.

Whoever this old rat was, whatever this 'hotel' was, whatever they were hoping to achieve by trapping him here, they weren't going to succeed. If they were aiming to make him their prisoner, to keep him here forever for whatever reason, they would fail. Just like every other force of evil that had the gall to believe itself capable of standing in his way.

He was Jendovahzoor. The Purple Dragon.

And if push came to shove, if they intended to stand in his way, he would ***burn*** this hotel and everyone in it to the ground.

He turned away from the door and made his way to the bed, hopping up on it like a giant cat; The mattress creaked loudly under his sheer weight, but the bed held firm despite it. It was barely big enough to contain him, his long tail hanging off the foot like a large snake, but it was comfortable enough. He coiled up on himself, much like a frightened dog would do to protect its underbelly, and laid his head down to rest. He wisely decided to let the candle burn, as he didn't want to imagine what would happen if he blew it out.

He didn't stop glaring at the door until his mind finally succumbed to exhaustion, and the glow of his eyes ceased as they closed shut.

Chapter 2: Night 1, Part 2

The soft, airy chime of a small bell echoed through the silence, breaking it and stirring Spyro from his rest.

His gave a soft growl, his eyes tightening in an attempt to retain his state of blissful unconsciousness. He tried to shift in place, to roll himself away from the source of the noise so he could get back to sleep…but as he tried to move, he found himself unable to. It wasn't as if he was tied down and bound by chains, but rather that his body wasn't responding to his will to move it.

His eyes shot open in alarm, his mind racing with dreadful possibilities, only to find himself in darkness.

And it wasn't dark as a place with no light, such as a room with no sources of it; it would've been much simpler if it was. No, this darkness was tangible. Solid. Holding him in place even as he hung suspended in a pure black void. He could actually feel it touching him; contacting him in a physical form. It felt almost like he was submerged in water, the way it enveloped him from all possible angles; there was no temperature to it either, looking deathly cold but not feeling either sort of way. It did take shape, though; like the form of very dark cloud forming into a black, swirling tunnel of shadows that led into the dark abyss. The abyss he was floating in, with no ground for his feet to rest upon and no air for his wings to catch. Just the empty void of space.

His eyes darted around in a fast-growing panic; the only things that he could move, as he looked about the dark, endless, emptiness…

…well, that wasn't entirely true: it wasn't *empty.*

All around his suspended form, as countless as the stars in the night sky, were these forms of lights slowly floating about the void. They were yellow-green in color, resembling wispy balls of glowing smoke than anything else, with long tails that flickered like fire in slow-motion. From each of them, a voice could be heard; a long, exhausted groan, like someone outright begging to finally rest. The moans and sighs filled his ears like a choir of tiredness, all of them longing to be gone from this place.

His panic turned to dread as he watched one of these orbs pass by his head, giving off a feminine groan that begged for the sweet release of rest. He knew what it was; the realization came to him in a rush of existential terror.

It was a *soul.*

A soul of the dead.

Just as he felt like he would devolve into fear, another chime of a bell echoed through the dark; a soft, musical note that passed through his very being, bypassing his ears and reaching

his very soul. He could feel the dread and panic within him slowly fade away, allowing him to relax; he closed his eyes and gave a sigh through his nose, though no smoke came out this time.

“C’mon now! Throw away all dem worries! Fo’get ‘bout ‘em!”

Spyro opened his eyes and looked up as a male voice cut through the void, silencing all the other voices around him. It was strange, with a heavy accent of some kind; an accent he felt he had heard before but was unable to place where. He looked about the darkness, trying to find the owner of the voice, only for a distant speck of light to shine at the end of the tunnel; this speck started off small, but steadily grew in size and shape until it eventually molded about the distinct form of a person. Light filled the form, colors came to be, and soon someone entered the void with him.

He was unsure what to make of this person. He was a peculiar-looking creature, no bigger than Gregory, who resembled a human skeleton…or the top-half of one, at least; instead of a pair of legs, he had a long, wisp tail like that of a ghost or genie. His head was that of a human skull with no bottom jaw (a skull that could almost be described as cute in appearance), with long, wavy gray hair. He wore a black, long-sleeved jersey with two rows of golden chained buttons on the front, along with a boxy blue hat with a yellow cross on the front. In his bony hands he held a gleaming scythe, completing the image of what Spyro was guessing him to be.

“Ah, there you are!” The little skeleton exclaimed as he approached, tail swishing in the ‘air’ behind him. “Been needin’ to talk to ya’s for a while now.” He came to a stop a few feet away from the dragon, and then politely tipped his hat to him. “You’re da big ‘Jendovahzoor’ that’s been causin’ all da fuss in da livin’ world, right?”

Spyro wasn’t sure if he was able to talk in his physical voice, so he spoke in his telepathic one instead. “***Yes.***”

“Good. That means I got da right guy for da job.” The skeleton commented. “The name’s Death. Pleased to meet’cha, bud.”

That didn’t do anything to soothe Spyro’s current state of emotion. This wasn’t the form of the Grim Reaper that he was familiar with, but if this truly was death, then that didn’t spell anything good for his current state.

“***Then…am I dead?***” He asked, a touch of dread entering his voice.

Much to his relief, Death shook his head.

“No, *yer* not dead.” He reassured the dragon as he floated backwards a bit. “But there are a few people that are. People that now need yer help.” He then turned away, raising a hand

towards the nearby souls. “Alright, everyone, line up! One at a time!”

At his command all of the souls that had been aimlessly floating about the place suddenly sprang to life and approached the little reaper, forming a single line in front of him. Spyro watched wordlessly as Death raised his scythe and prepared to swing.

“Ya see, my job is removin’ Lost Souls from da livin’ world, so that dey can find peace in da afterlife and what not.” Death told him before, with a quick grunt, he raised his scythe over his head before bringing it down, slicing through the first ‘Lost Soul’ in line. The soul expelled its flames and bloomed into a ball of light, and a ghostly sigh of pure relief came from it, as if freed from a heavy burden. It then floated upwards and away into the nothingness, off towards what Spyro assumed would be heaven.

“And dat hotel you’re currently stayin’ in is full of lost souls trapped by that old rat and his family, unable to leave da livin’ world.” The reaper explained, motioning for the next soul to approach him. “That’s why I helped ya find it.”

That made Spyro pause, his eyes widening in surprise. “**You’re *the one who brought me to this place?***”

Death swung his scythe again, freeing another soul from their eternal purgatory. “Yeah, and I’m real sorry ‘bout dat.” He said earnestly, rubbing the back of his head. “Dat old hotel has been causin’ trouble fer me fer a very long time, and I need somebody powerful ta deal wid it. And ya were the only one powerful enough ta help dat I could find. That place’s full of lost souls trapped by dark magic and what needs to be removed right away!” He continued to explain as he worked, slicing through more lost souls with his scythe. “What I needs you ta do is to go through da hotel, doin’ what you do best, and free them from that old mousetrap so dey’se can move on proper.”

Surprisingly enough, Spyro didn’t find himself to be angry with the little reaper. His logic was sound enough: Spyro was, indeed, the most powerful being in these parts. And if this Gregory House was truly using dark magic to trap the souls of the departed for their own gains, then it was his job to step in and put an end to it. Yes, it meant he was going to be away from home for a little while, and he could imagine everyone getting worried about him, but there were currently others who needed him.

If they weren’t saved, who knows what their ultimate fate could be; being trapped in the building for all eternity was perhaps the better outcome compared to the alternatives. Who knows what Gregory did with the souls he successfully trapped…

“Tell ya what: I’ll makes ya a deal.” Death suddenly spoke up again, pulling the dragon from his train of thought. “If ya can bring me enuff Souls from that place, and I’ll owe ya’s a Favor: anythin’ in my power, and it’ll be yers.”

Spyro perked up at that. Now *that* was a tempting offer.

A favor from Death itself.

"***How many souls do you need me to save?***" He asked.

"Hmm…" Death paused for a moment, not taking his 'eyes' off his work, before he answered: "Twelve. That's how many souls are at a point of savin' right now."

Twelve. That was doable.

"***Is there anything I need to beware of?***" Spyro then asked.

Death nodded. "That hotel is full of danger and what not; most of da residents will try ta hurt ya in some way or another." He said as he slashed the last soul in line, leaving it to ascend into the afterlife as he turned back to the dragon. "It's nothing that da likes of you can't handle, though all da same, I'd be careful if I were ya."

So, there were more residents than Gregory…very well. He would deal with them just as he intended to deal with that old rat.

"***Very well. We have a deal.***" Spyro told him, eyes narrowing in draconic determination. "***I'll save those souls for you.***"

The skeleton seemed to smile at that…as much as a skeleton could smile, that is. "Great! Thanks a lot, buddy! This is gonna help us out big time!" He said happily, even as he began to fade back into the void. "Now, whenever ya get a soul or two, just come and visit me in yer dreams, and I'll take them off yer hands."

The little bell rang once more as he disappeared completely, calling out one last time.
"*See ya later, pal!*"

****KRA-KOOOOOOOM!!****

"*MMMMRRRRREEEEOOOOWWWW!!!*"

It was a weird sensation: to jump out of your skin twice in one go.

Spyro was jolted awake by a powerful clap of thunder that boomed just outside his window, the light from the lightning shining through, bright and blue. Said thunder was immediately followed by the high-pitched, wailing scream of an animal; an animal whose throat had been mangled beyond recognition. It was enough to make the dragon bolt out of bed with a jump, giving a warbled bark of alarm as he fell over the edge and landed sideways on the floor with

a heavy thud; his tail whipped across the room as he did so, striking the wall and punching a hole clear through it near the door, leaving a gap that revealed the hallway.

He lay there for a moment, staring wide-eyed at the window, his sides heaving up and down as he breathed heavily. Had that all really happened? Encountering Death in his dreams? Making a deal to save twelve souls from this place? What was *going on* tonight?

And what in Frith's creation had made that sound?

His ears perked up when he heard footsteps coming from the opposite side of the door; the rushed pitter-patter of paws, as if their owner was in a hurry. Spyro rolled over onto his stomach, taking care to make sure his wings didn't hit anything as he folded them back to his sides, and managed to get himself back up onto all fours just as Gregory's face appeared through the new hole.

"Wha-Wha…what on earth happened?!" Gregory exclaimed, examining the hole with wide eyes. His face disappeared from view, and the door creaked open to reveal the rat in his entirety, candle in hand. "Are you alright, my friend?!"

For all the control he usually had over his emotions, Spyro couldn't stop a scowl from forming across his face at being called 'Friend'. He was seeing this cross-eyed rat in a new light now, and it wasn't a good one; if his dream had been true, and Gregory was a user of dark magic and had been capturing souls for whatever reason, then that made him an enemy.

A defiler of the natural order of things.

And it was a Jendovah's job to purge the existence of defilers.

For now, though, he would have to fight his every urge to roast Gregory on the spot, at least for now. He should wait until he found all twelve souls before he did anything drastic, for the souls' sake.

"It's nothing." He said, if a bit firmly, shaking his head to clear it of his dark thoughts for the rat before turning him around to face the door. "I was just startled by the thunder."

He wasn't sure why he didn't mention the scream.

If Gregory had noticed the dragon's sudden moment of hostility, he didn't show it. "Well, it must've been a real shock, seeing how it made you add a hole to the wall." He said simply. Spyro simply sighed. "I can pay for it…" He grumbled.

That seemed to satisfy Gregory. "I'll see to it that your room is repaired, then." He told Spyro, stepping out of the doorway. "In the meantime, feel free to wander about the grounds. Mingle with some of the other guests and all that."

‘*So I can be primed for your tricks, I’m sure.*’ Spyro thought to himself. He was about to object when a thought crossed his mind. ‘*It would be a good chance to search for those Lost Souls.*’

“Fine.” Was all he said as he made his way past Gregory and stepped out into the hallway. Once out of his room, he took notice of something that made him frown in confusion: he had assumed he had been asleep for quite some time; long enough to have dreams, at least.

So why was everything still so dark?

He was impressed that this hotel had its own library.

While he was waiting for the staff of Gregory House to finish repairing his room, he had found the Library on the first floor and made himself comfortable in it. He imagined it would take a while for them to patch up such a large hole, so he might as well stay here for a spell and do a bit of light reading. He might even be able to find something to help him recover the Lost Souls, if he was lucky. So, that’s where he found himself, lounging comfortably across the floor like a large cat with an open book on the ground at his folded paws, one of his fingers ready to turn the page.

Though he had to admit, many of the books here were…odd, to say the least. Some of the books he had found included “Judgement Day”, “Me and My Dolly”, “I Hate Smoke”, “Brother’s Lasso”, and “Sick but Happy”, among several others such titles.

The book he was reading at that moment was the first edition of “Back in Time”, written by someone called the Clock Master. Spyro had anticipated it to be a philosophical book on the existence of time, or even a time-travelling fiction novel, but it ended up being little more than the author constantly lamenting the fact that he was getting older with age every day, and that the glorious days of his youth were long behind him.

Made Spyro glad that he, as a dragon, wouldn’t have to worry about getting old.

At least not for a long, *long* time.

He gave a reptilian croon as he turned the final page, closing the book afterwards; he had been in this library for an hour so far, and still he wasn’t any closer to finding anything about Lost Souls, or anything about this hotel in general. He had hoped he had found something with the first book he had read, titled “Gregory Exposed”…but all that ended up being was a biography of sorts, ‘exposing’ Gregory’s long history of perverted escapades with women and pictures of women…

Spyro was a little young to be drinking, but after all that he had witnessed in that book, a trip to the bar on the second floor was sounding pretty good.

He took the closed book in his mouth and got up off the floor; it took a little bit of effort to put the book back on the shelf, due to being quadrupedal, but after a moment he managed to push it back into place with his snout. He then turned to see if there was anything else worth reading.

A loud crash suddenly rang out from the halls, accompanied by a surprised yell (presumably from Gregory); Spyro looked towards the library door in surprise, just in time to hear Gregory yelling something rather obscene. This was followed by a bout of childish laughter, then by the sound of scampering paws growing closer to the door; a moment later, it swung open, and a new rodentkin dashed into the room, slamming the door behind him and locking it with a laugh.

Spyro cocked his head to the side in curiosity. This rat was a child, much younger than Gregory was, and much smaller too, only about half Gregory's size. His fur was much healthier-looking as well, being a sandy-blonde in color, while the messy hair on his head was yellow-blonde, but his eyes (which were straight unlike the old rat's) were the same magenta color. He wore a red-and-yellow striped T-shirt and a pair of black shorts.

Someone grabbed the door handle and shook it violently. "JAMES, YOU LITTLE BRAT! OPEN THIS DOOR AT ONCE!" Gregory's voice shouted from behind the door, following by a series of harsh banging against the wood.

The little rat, 'James', only laughed mockingly as he pushed his back against the door as if to hold it in place. "Nuh-uh, you old geezer!" He teased, sticking out his tongue. "You'll never get me! Nyeh-Nyeh!"

"JAMES, YOU NASTY CHILD!" Gregory continued to shout, though he stopped banging on the door. "ONE OF THESE DAYS, I'M GOING TO TEACH YOU A LESSON! UGH!"

And with that, the old rat stormed off, the sound of angry footsteps slowly fading down the Hall.

Spyro frowned; Gregory seemed a bit old to be a parent, but if this child was truly his, then he wasn't being a very good one.

James gave a single 'Heh', accompanied by an outright-wicked smirk, as he turned around. However, when he spotted Spyro standing there, his smirk faded and his eyes went wide, though not out of fear.

"Woah!" He exclaimed, before bouncing up to the dragon in excitement. "Are you a *dragon?!* A *real dragon?!*"

Spyro blanched away from the excited furling, wasn't sure what to do; apart from his siblings

and a few others he knew, he was never really that good with children. By no means cruel to them; he just didn't know how to handle them. Unlike his mother, who was a natural at dealing with kids, he had always let the women-folk tend to the young while he kept a respectable distance.

"I am." He finally said, not moving from the spot.

James' eyes were practically sparkling at this point. "That's so coooool!" He cheered, bouncing up and down with excitement. Spyro could only take a step backwards, unsure what to do. "Are you staying here at the hotel? Can you fly? Do you have a treasure hoard? How many knights have you eaten? Wait, can you breathe fire?!" He hopped up to Spyro and began tugging on his forelimb. "I wanna see you breathe fire! *Breathe fire!*"

"I'm not going to just breathe fire!" Spyro snapped as he pulled his limb away, his temper staring to rise against his will; calm children were one thing, but hyperactive ones were something else entirely. "We're inside a building! I could burn the whole place down if I'm not careful!"

"*Awww*, but I wanna see you breathe fire!" James whined, stomping his feet like a spoiled Child.

Spyro gave a heavy sign through his nose, twin streams of smoke shooting out of his nostrils, his brow twitching in irritation. It was only the idea of what his mother would say if she found out he hurt a child that was keeping him from granting this little brat's wish in a way that he probably wouldn't like.

Luckily, he was saved by the sound of someone unlocking the door; with a gust of air, the door swung openly harshly, revealing a very unhappy Gregory standing there, candle in one hand and a large ring of keys in the other. "DON'T THINK I WON'T TAN YOUR HIDE, YOUNG MAN!" He shouted as he stormed in, only to screech to a halt when he saw Spyro, eyes widening. "Oh! M-My friend, I didn't realize you were in here!" He stammered, flustered.

He then glanced at James. "I do hope my grandson hasn't been giving you any trouble!"

Spyro blinked at that. So, James was Gregory's *grandson*, not son. That made more sense. "He's pestering me to unleash my flames for his amusement, but other than that, it's fine." He told him. "In a library, no less."

Gregory gave a disapproving huff. "James! Don't you remember what happened the last time the hotel caught on fire?" He scolded the child.

"Grandpa! There's a dragon in the hotel!" James said as he scampered up to his grandfather,

as if all the conflict and heated words had never happened. “Is he one of the guests?”

“Yes, James, he just checked in last night.” The old rat told him as he put his keys into his coat pocket, placing the free hand on the boy’s head to stop his bouncing.

That gave Spyro pause. Checked in last night…he was right; he had slept through the entire night, and it was the next day. It should’ve been light outside, if dimly so thanks to the forest’s canopy.

So *why* was it still dark?

“You’ll be pleased to hear that your room has been repaired.” Gregory then said, leading the still-excited James toward the door. “You may return to it any time. Though the hotel is still open to wander if you wish, and I do recommend it; some of our other guests have taken an interest in meeting you.”

Spyro didn’t respond, simply waiting for the two rodentkin to leave the room; he waited until the door was closed before letting himself relax, his wings sagging against his sides. He then turned to the nearest shelf and began browsing the books again; surely there had to be something here that would share even the smallest bit of information about Lost Souls and Gregory House.

He ended up calling it quits after coming across the series of “Syringe Monthly”, which made him feel uneasy for obvious reasons.

-

Hmph…*repaired*, indeed…

This was flat-out pathetic. No wonder it hadn’t taken that long. Then again, he doubted there was anyone inside this ‘hotel of nowhere’ that had the knowledge or equipment to repair the wall of a building.

He closed his eyes and gave a small sigh, shaking his head in disapproval; so much for any sense of privacy he could get in this place. He opened them again to look about the hall; it was still dark, the dim light from outside shining in like moonlight more than anything else, casting long shadows across the floor and walls. Were he anyone else he would’ve found it scary. Luckily, dragons had incredible night vision, leaving him able to see quite well in the dark, so that tactic of fear wouldn’t work.

So, who knew what Gregory had planned for him when that failed.

He was debating whether or not to return to this room, maybe see if he could do something about the hole, when a voice suddenly echoed up from down the hall…not just a voice, but

someone singing…along with two points of lights, one pink and one gold, and the sound of metallic wheels turning.

"*Do you know~? Who I am~? They call me Judgement Boy~! Do you know~? Who I am~? They call me Judgement Boy~!*" The 'song', if one could call it that, was simply this person (a male, judging from the voice)
singing that one sentence over and over again. They continued to sing even as they came into view, and Spyro's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of them.

The only way to describe him was as an anthropomorphic set of scales: the type seen in a courtroom. He had a humanoid head and torso, with reddish-orange skin, yellow hair, and a pink, purple, and yellow striped shirt. He had no bottom half; instead, he had two circular black five-ton weights strung vertically where his legs should be. He hung from the ceiling by his cone-shaped hat, which was striped red and purple and had a hook at the tip, which in turn was attached to a rail that ran across the ceiling. His face was almost oni-like in appearance, with a small round nose and long fangs protruding from the sides of his wide mouth; he seemed to be wearing a pair of black glasses…or were those markings around his eyes? He had two steel bars for arms with black spheres at the shoulders and ends; connected to each end of his "arms" were steel cages supported by short chains. Inside the left cage was a glowing golden crystal in the shape of a dollar sign, and inside the right cage was a glowing pink crystal in the shape of a heart. And finally, he had the words "The Judgement Day" printed across the front of his shirt.

"*Do you know~? Who I am~? They call me Judgement Boy~!*" This being (Judgement Boy, he assumed based on the song) gave Spyro a curious glance but said nothing to him, rolling on his rail past the dragon, simply singing his song over and over. "*Do you know~? Who I am~? They call me Judgement Boy~!*"

It was then, just as he was beginning to pass by, that Spyro saw it: there, hovering next to Judgement Boy's head, was a Lost Soul! He didn't see it at first due to it floating behind the scale's head, but it looked just like the balls of wispy flames that Death had been gathering in his dream!

So, the guests had the Souls.

"W-Wait!" Spyro exclaimed, scrambling to his feet; said smooth dragon-scale paws slipped on the smooth, slightly-moist wooden floors, making him stumble forward. "Where did you get that?!" He called out for Judgement Boy, but Judgement Boy didn't pay him any attention; he just kept singing as he and his soul faded into the darkness of the house, leaving only the glowing lights of the caged crystals.

Spyro gathered his footing and tried to run after the strange creature, his claws scratching up the floor as he struggled to get a grip, but only made it about a yard or two when a flash of lightning tore through the nearby windows, lighting up the hallway with a brilliant blue,

along with the very sudden (and very loud) explosion of thunder that shook the building, making the dragon freeze in his tracks.

KRA-KOOOOOOOM!!*

“MMMMRRRRREEEEOOOOWWWW!!!”

But the thunder was nothing compared to the loud, wailing scream that tore through the air.

This scream was much louder than the one he heard before, no more walls to muffle it even a little…and that was because, he realized, he was right in front of where it was coming from:

From behind the bolted steel door. Which he was now standing in front of.

He just stood there, wide-eyed, in an almost defensive, wide-footed stance, staring up at the metallic behemoth in front of him. It almost loomed over him, like a threatening storm, making his dorsal spines rattle with dreadful anticipation. He recognized the sound now; he knew it all too well. It was mangled and pained, as if coming from a damaged throat, but it was unmistakably the sound of a cat’s wailing meow.

A cat.

That was the monster Gregory locked away in this room? It made sense, given the circumstances: the Feral Cats of Nimh were a common predatory beast that the Rodentkin lived in terror of for all of their civilization; even now, with all their advancements, entire villages could be razed to the ground by the giant rampaging felines, and many a mouse could be named a hero for slaying one…or a fool for trying.

But how did one get to this place? And was it really that much of a threat to go this far in keeping it contained? The last time he had seen anything this heavily chained and sealed away was-

…was…
…
That day.
…
That day.
…
No.
…
NO.

NEVER AGAIN.

Spyro's shackles rose in preparation, and a snarling growl rumbled from behind bared fangs that glistening in the dim light of the hall. His claws flexed against the floor, living claw marks in the wood. His pupils narrowed into perfect slits, his eyes narrowing as they began to glow with an orange fire, the flames licking the edges of his eye-ridges.

He stepped forward, ready to smash the door down with his horns; he would not allow the same events of that day to happen again.

Never again.

He was just about to charge, his eyes blazing bright enough to cast light onto the metal, when a new sound made it way to his sensitive ears.

Crying.

Soft, gentle, *utterly-broken* crying.

The flames in his eyes were snuffed out almost instantly, as the enraged snarl faded into a look of confusion. That sound was not the sound of a ferocious beast or unspeakable monster; it was someone…someone who was in terrible pain…pain of both body and heart alike: soft, stuttered hiccups and choked sobs, unfocused and struggling to be kept quiet, as if they were afraid of the consequences for crying.

That was *not* a monster behind that door.

His body seemed to move on its own, as if he was under a trance; he shifted his weight back onto his hind legs and stood upright (doubling his height), lifting his forearms and placing his hand-paws on the rusty surface of the door; the metal was icy cold and rough to the touch, but he paid it no mind. Instead, he quickly glanced in either direction of the hall, to make sure no one was there to see him, and then grabbed the lock at the center of the chains with his right hand-paw; the chains rattled against the steel door, causing a metallic clatter to echo down the hall.

The crying stopped.

"Don't fear. I'm not going to hurt you." Spyro called out to whoever was on the other side. "I'm going to get you out of there, so just hang on."

He then glared at the lock in his hand-paw, before he curled his fingers around it and *squeezed.* ***Hard.***

With the noisy screech of shattering pieces and tearing metal, the lock crumpled in his hand as if he was crushing up a wad of paper; he wrenched back his arm and tore what remained off the lock from the chains, throwing it aside to shatter and scatter across the floor. He then

grabbed the chains with both hand-paws and ripped them clean apart with the sound of snapping links, tossing them to the side like the trash he now viewed them to be.

“I got the chains broken.” He called out again, placing his hand-paws against the metal. “I’m going to see if I can break the door down. If you can, get away from the-”

“*Go away.*”

Spyro froze, eyes widening, as the new voice interrupted him. It was a higher voice that wasn’t masculine, but it wasn’t outright feminine either; some sort of strange middle ground Spyro had never heard before…at least, he thought he hadn’t.

“Don’t worry. I’m trying to help you escape.” The dragon reassured the voice, sliding down until he was on all fours against, taking a step back from the door to look it over. “I just need to-”

“*I said go away!*”

There was a moment of silence before Spyro spoke again, his eye-ridges furrowed with determination.

“I can’t do that.” He said simply.

“*What? Can’t ignore the rot of sympathy eating at your heart? Just have to make my misery your business? Is that it?*” The voice asked, bitter and pained. “*There’s nothing to save here. Not anymore.*”

“If I believed that, I wouldn’t be trying to help you right now.” Spyro continued, refusing to bend. “I can tell you’re in pain; I can help you with it.”

There was a laugh from the other side of the door; a cold, hollow, humorless scoff that could only come from a heart that was truly dead.

“*I’ve been hurting for a long time.*” The voice said. “*What difference could you make?*”

The dragon shook his head. “What would you want me to do? Just ignore you and walk away?” He asked. “No. I can’t do that. I won’t do that.”

“*You’re wasting your time.*” The voice said, plain and simple, as if it was stating common fact. “*I’m not important to you; to you, I’m nothing more than a flea-bitten stranger.*”

“That doesn’t make this okay!” Spyro lifted a hand-paw and struck it against the metal door, making it audibly ring. “I don’t know why Gregory locked you in this prison, but I’m not about to let someone suffer like this!”

“*Why not?*” The voice snapped back. “*There will only be trouble from you having anything to do with me. All you’re asking for is to be hurt. That old rat must have told you all his nonsense already, right? About what I am and what happened to me? What I do to anyone who gets too close?*”

That gave Spyro pause; ‘what *happened* to him’?

“No, he didn’t…” He told them. “He claimed you were some sort of monster that needed to be locked away but didn’t say anything about it besides that.”

There was a pause on their end as well. “*…Strange…usually he’s never not able to bring up that story. Even now, he can never stop taunting me with it…*” The voice trailed off into a pained groan, an equally-pained meow coming soon after.

That was it. Spyro wasn’t going to just sit here and listen to this creature suffer any longer, even if they didn’t want his help. He could tell this person was in great suffering, and if there was even the smallest thing he could do to ease it, he would do it.

He wasn’t sure if the voice inside was close to the door, so he couldn’t risk just smashing it down. He would have to open it normally instead, once he dealt with the final lock: stepping back up to the door, he shifted back to his hind legs again and stood up, using his tail to balance himself, before placing his hand-paws against the steel again. He felt around the edge of the door until he came across the main bolt clicked into the wall, next to the keyhole, before stuffing his fingers into the thin gap between the door and its frame; the door groaned loudly as he crushed the very metal, denting the side of the door inwards as he pulled with immense strength. He kept pulling until the bolt finally broke free with a loud clang, falling to the floor in a clatter.

Giving a satisfied, animalistic grunt, Spyro then began to pull the door open; the thing was incredibly heavy, and its hinges made a loud groaning sound as they moved, as if they hadn’t turned in a while. But the dragon’s great strength allowed him to open it with relative ease, if with a bit of effort.
And once the door was opened enough, he pushed his way through the gap and quickly

slipped inside the room like a giant serpent, the last of his long tail slithering in just before the door slowly swung shut. It closed with a heavy clunk, which vibrated through the walls for several seconds.

There were two things about this room that hit Spyro with the force of a speeding train. First was how immensely cold the air was: he could see his breath forming into a hot mist every time he breathed. Even the outside of the hotel hadn’t been this cold, with an almost supernatural iciness to it. Second was the stench: a horrid smell like that of rotting meat, nearly strong enough to make him gag; it was as if something had been thrown in here to rot

forever. It was almost pitch-black in here, to the point where even his night vision was unable to see all the way through it.

"*You…you're a dragon…*"

Spyro turned in the direction of the voice, which was no longer muffled by the barrier no longer between them; there, in the corner of the room, he spotted them: a figure huddled in the darkness, no bigger than Gregory, staring back at him with glowing red eyes with slit pupils. The darkness of the room was so deep that Spyro couldn't make them out entirely, but he was just able to see the outline of two cat ears above the eyes.

He also took notice of the voice clarity this time around…notably of how young they sounded; haggard of strength, clearly having experienced far too much and becoming a hardened shell. and yet still young. Probably no older than he was in terms of age group.

"Why have you come here?" The figure then asked, eyes narrowing. "What kind of reality could a dragon want to escape from?"

Spyro stared at him for a moment, wondering if he should tell them the truth about Death and the Lost Souls; there was the potential they would snitch to Gregory…wait…no…no they wouldn't snitch. Even if he couldn't see them, Spyro could tell this person had no love or loyalty to the old rat.

"I didn't come here, if that means anything." Spyro told them firmly, his wings flexing a bit to get the blood flowing through them. "I was *led* to this hotel. By *Death.*"

That made the figure perk up, the eyes widening in surprise; as they moved, the sound of chains sliding across the floor was heard.

"You're not wandering…" They muttered, more to themselves than to him. Their eyes narrowed again. "Then you were a fool to let yourself be led to this hotel, even by Death."

They said bitterly. "There is nothing to save here, and you've only damned yourself."

Spyro didn't like being called a fool, but he wasn't going to hold it against someone who had clearly suffered enough. "That's not what Death seems to think, and I am trapped by no one." He told them darkly, a hint of his draconic growl coming through his voice. "He's instructed me to find twelve Lost Souls; that's what I'm here to find."

The figured paused, staying still. "Lost Souls…" He muttered. "You mean these."

There was movement in the darkness before a soft blue light suddenly shone out as a Lost Soul appeared from the figure's hands and floated up into the air.

Spyro had to squint against the sudden light, but his vision slowly corrected itself, allowing him to see the room in its entirety for the first time…and it was nothing short of a dungeon cell, with stone-brick walls, a cobblestone floor, and even a reinforced ceiling. There was a window on the far wall, but it had been bolted up with wooden planks, blocking all outside light from entering the room.

And then he turned to the figure in the corner…and his eyes widened in shock, while his heart clenched in absolute *horror.*

He had been right before; they were a cat, but an anthropomorphic one: a young male Felidae, not quite a full adult yet…but the question of if he could even be considered a cat anymore was up for debate. The toll of abuse was clear all over; what little fur left on him was starchy and only really growing in isolated patches, while everywhere else showed patchwork flesh that varied in color, from a dark purple to a sickly green. And the stitches… Frith above, the stitches. Someone had taken a needle and sewn everything shut: his eyes, mouth, ears, even his limbs and tail, were all sewn up like a patchwork quilt of flesh. The only reason he must have been able to function had to be through age alone, since a majority of the stitches looked visibly decayed and plucked apart. And if that wasn't horrific enough, he was clearly neglected and malnourished, his whiskers twisted up and his ribs visible to even an untrained eye. He wore baggy, ratty pants that had seen its fair number of repairs, judging from the number of seams around the knees, while his shirt, which was in the same worn-and-torn state, was striped red-and-blue, with the name “Jack Ketch” on the front of it; Both were stained all over with dried blood. And to top everything off, he was shackled at the ankles, wrists, and even his neck by several heavy chains connected to the wall.

The stitched-up cat narrowed his eyes at the dragon’s reaction; an act that must’ve been painful to do in itself, due to the stitches. “So, here I am. You finally see the truth.” He said bitterly. “Still think there’s something to save?”

Spyro didn’t say anything…in fact, he couldn’t say anything; his voice had locked up in his throat, leaving him unable to do much other than croon in distress.

This was *beyond horrific. Beyond wrong.* He had thought he had seen the absolute worst of cruelty before during his many years, but this was something only the likes of the Skaven were capable of. Even being your enemy wouldn’t justify *this.*

How black did a heart have to be to inflict this much suffering upon a single soul?

“Who…?” Spyro began, struggling to find his voice from the sheer horror he was feeling for the wretched creature in front of him. “*…who did this to you?*”

“…I don’t remember…It’s been so long since that night…” The cat said softly, turning his head away. “…but it isn’t hard to guess.”

In that split second, from those words alone, the overwhelming senses of horror and sorrow he was feeling were snuffed out, instantly replaced by a brand-new emotion: red-hot *murderous* ***rage.***
The cat barely had time to react before Spyro's growl thundered through the cell, vibrating the very stone itself. The dragon's snarling visage was so full of rage that it could kill a fully-grown behemoth with mere eye-contact alone. A rumbling fire was blazing in his lungs and up his throat, shining through the edges of his scales and forming a spiderweb of fiery light across the length of his underbelly; the temperature in the room quickly rose to dangerous levels, and a hot orange light filled the room to a near-blinding degree.

"***Gregorrrrrry…***" His voice rumbled deep and draconic, echoing as if several people were speaking at once.

****KRA-KOOOOOOOM!!****

As if on cue for dramatic effect, a bolt of lightning exploded just outside the window, filling the room with a blinding light-blue light that was even brighter than Spyro's flames. The cat's eyes went wide, straining against the stitches binding them, before he threw his head back and let out the most agonized wail that Spyro had ever heard. His mouth also strained against their bonds as he screamed, to the point of drawing blood.

That was enough to snap the dragon out of his angry trance, and he quickly snuffed the fire in his chest out; the glow instantly faded, plunging the room back into the dim light of the Lost Soul (which in itself seemed to be cowering from him in the corner). He took a step forward toward the now-sobbing feline, reaching a hand-paw out to do…where wasn't sure, but he had to do *something!*

The cat noticed his hand approach and roughly pushed it away with his shoulder.
"I don't need your empty pity!" He exclaimed, trying to turn away from the dragon, but was unable to move very far due to his chains.

"Well, too bad! You have it!" Spyro couldn't stop himself from snapping. "Do you honestly expect me to just sit back and watch as you literally *die* before my eyes?!"

"Why not?!" The cat snapped back. "There's no point in trying to fight it! It all turns out the same way in the end!"

"I don't believe that! There's always a reason to fight! You may have given up, but I'm not going to let it be the end of you!"

"You're just the same as everyone else who comes here! They all think they can escape! They all say they won't become a part of this place! But they all do! They all break their promises!"

“Do not confuse me for a mere mortal! I am *not* some weak human or beastkin! I am *Jendovahzoor*, and when I give my word, I keep it! And I *promise* you that you *will* be avenged for what you’ve suffered!”
“*Why* do you even *care*?! I mean *nothing* to you! You’re just a stranger passing through, and I’m just a *corpse* you passed by!”

“That doesn’t make all of this any less wrong! You do *not* deserve to *suffer like this!*”

“*Yes, I do!*” The cat finally cried, angry tears pricking his eyes; Spyro paused at that, watching as the pathetic creature began to openly weep. “I failed to stop him! I had a chance to finally end it! To stop all the pain! The fear! The darkness! Then she-!” He grimaced, exceptionally-painful memories bubbling forth like a cauldron over a fire. “I *trusted* her! I helped her escape! I thought it was finally going to end! And she *joined them!*”

He forced himself to stop, a soft hiccup of a sob escaping his lips as he wiped at his cheeks with a paw.

“There’s no point trying to fight.” He said, still sniffling. “No point wasting your energy. No matter what you do, Gregory House always wins.”

The next couple of moments passed in silence. Spyro didn’t say anything; he just stood there, staring down at the broken soul before him…then he simply sat back on his hind legs, reaching both hands out to the chain attached to the cat’s left leg.

“I know this probably means nothing to you, but I am truly sorry. You have suffered more than anyone I’ve ever known; probably for much longer than even I could think of.” He told him as his paws travelled up the chain toward the cuff. “I don’t think there’s *anything* in this world that could right the wrongs you’ve suffered…but *this* I do promise you, whether you believe it or not: I *will* free you and everyone else like you from this damned place. And those who did this to you will pay for what they’ve done. This, you have the word of Jendovahzoor.”

To emphasize his words, he took the cuff between both hand-paws and pulled in apart; the very hinges of the lock snapped loudly as the cuff itself was broken, opening to free the limb before falling to the floor with a clatter. The cat said nothing as Spyro then moved to the rest of the cuffs, breaking them one by one with the strength of his hands alone, until he reached the one around his neck. The dragon paused for a second with this one, looking to the cat as if asking for permission. The stitched-up feline only stared at Spyro in silence, but otherwise did nothing to stop him from working his fingers around the metallic hoop to avoid scratching with his sharp claws. He then pulled the collar apart with a snap, tossing it away. The flesh around his neck and limbs was red-raw; despite himself, the cat did give a relieved sigh as he rubbed his neck, finally freed from his burdens. Spyro, meanwhile, stepped back to his original position, dropping back down on all fours.

“You’re not going to listen to me no matter what I say, are you?” He then asked, looking at Spyro with tired eyes.

Spyro allowed himself a smile. “Not in this lifetime.”

The cat stared at him for another moment before he gave a defeated sigh and slumped back against the wall. “Fine. Do whatever you want. It doesn’t matter to me.”
Spyro nodded with approval. “Well, if we are going to be allies from this point on, may I at least have your name?” He asked.

“We’re not-!” The cat began, only to stop himself with a frustrated huff. He remained quiet for a few seconds before sighing in defeat. “…everyone in this hotel calls me Neko-Zombie. You can too, I guess.”

That got an odd look from the dragon, who cocked his head in confusion. Neko-Zombie? Well, that was a rather demeaning name, given the coincidences; probably thought up by Gregory to add a final insult to all the injury

“Well then, *Neko-Zombie*…” He began, earning a huff of annoyance from the one in question. “Do you mind if I take this soul?” He then asked, pointing to the soul in the corner; it no longer appeared to be cowering from him, ready and waiting to be freed from its eternal wandering.

Neko-Zombie stiffened; an act that was not missed by Spyro. “…that soul…I need it.” He said, a touch of fret in his voice. “Souls give strength…it keeps me from getting hungry…*so very hungry…I haven’t eaten in so long…*”

Spyro’s face darkened into a glare, his eyes glowing angrily; Gregory was starving him as well?

He caught himself, closing his eyes to will the flames in them to die down before opening them again, turning to the trembling feline. What to do now? He needed to get that soul back to Death, but he also didn’t want Neko-Zombie to suffer any more than he already was.
Then an idea came to him. “If I brought you something to eat, would you give it to me then?” He asked.

There was a pause, the shaking coming to a stop. “…can you bring me chocolate?” He asked, with just a sliver of hope in his voice. “There should be some in the kitchen. Or from Street Vendor.”

Spyro smiled, nodding. “I’ll see what I can find.”

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“*Do you know~? Who I am~? They call me Judgement Boy~…*”

There was no telling how often that tune got stuck in his head. He had heard it so many times throughout his many, many years that it was practically engrained into his very brain, coming up every now and again like a bad rash of the mind.

Gregory sang the single verse to himself as he waddled down the hall, candle in hand; he had finished up his chores in the main lobby (mainly cleaning up the mess James had made earlier) and was now making his rounds across the first floor of the hotel. He passed by each door, pulling on the handles of each one to ensure they were fully closed…as well as to ensure the guests were still in them.

A tedious job, perhaps, but one that was necessary. Wouldn’t want any of the guests accidentally wandering into places they shouldn’t, after all…

He rounded the corner, ready to begin his trek down the long hallway, but he saw something that made him freeze in alarm, his mismatched eyes going wide; there, laid scattered across the floor, were the broken remains of the chains that held the door to Neko-Zombie’s room closed.

“Huh?!” He exclaimed in alarm, hurrying up to the mess in a mild panic. “H-How did this happen?!”

He picked up one of the chain-links that was not attached to the others, inspecting it; it had been broken from sheer brute force, its form twisted beyond recognition. The lock itself was unrecognizable, resembling a crumbled-up piece of paper than anything else. And the door itself, while still attached to the frame and shut, had been dented inwards at the lock, the very door itself bent inwards at the spot.

How did this happen? Did that damn cat have anything to do with this?! Causing more trouble for him and his hotel by breaking free and causing havoc?! No, no, that couldn’t be the case; for all the trouble he was, he didn’t have nearly enough physical strength to break down such a reinforced door. And that was not counting the fact he was starving him to keep him weak. Was someone else responsible for this? If so, who on earth could possibly possess the sheer raw strength to-?

The door creaked with metal as it began to open, being pushed from the inside.
“Wha-…Where do you think you’re going?!” Gregory exclaimed angrily, stepping forward to push it closed again. “Haven’t you caused enough problems, you nasty animal?! Why, I oughta-GUH?!”

What little strength his aged body could muster was quickly overwhelming as said door was pushed open against him, outright shoving him to the side with incredible force, so much so that he stumbled backwards several feet. He barely had time to catch himself before Spyro

emerged from the prison cell, stepping out into the hall with a hint of urgency in his quadrupedal step.

Then his eyes fell on Gregory.

“M-My friend! What are *you* doing in there?!” Gregory stammered fretfully, not at all expecting this.

Then came the *flames.*

It was as if the dragon outright transformed before the rat’s very eyes. The flames bloomed through within his chest but did not stay there; this time, they spread throughout his entire body, transforming the drake into a burning figure of rage, his scaly skin resembling hot lava rock with veins of heat more than anything else. His lips were pulled back into a full snarl, baring all of his dagger-like teeth; the teeth themselves were actually glowing from the sheer temperature, resembling red-hot metal. A thunderous growl rumbled from his throat, enraged and bloodthirsty, and his eyes were glowing completely white, his eye-sockets turning a burnt black in color…the same colors the floors beneath his fiery feet was starting to turn.
“***YOU…***” His voice echoed draconically again, outright trembling is complete and absolute Fury.

Gregory could only shout in surprise as a clawed, flaming hand-paw shot forward and grabbed him by the front of his shirt; before he knew it he was lifted into the air as Spyro rose up on his hind legs, his burning horns scrambling against the ceiling and leaving burn marks where they touched, and hoisted him into the air, pulling him dangerously close until their noses were almost touching.

“*W-W-What are you doing?!*” Gregory cried out as he thrashed about in panic, dropping his candle to the floor. “*Stop it! Put me down!*”
“***DID YOU DO THIS TO HIM?!***” The dragon’s roaring voice boomed through the hallway, rattling picture frames and the doors throughout it; his free hand snapped open, his claws extending to full length in preparation for slashing through flesh. “***WERE YOU THE ONE WHO SEWED HIM UP LIKE A RAGDOLL?!***”

“Y-You mean Neko-Zombie?!” Gregory asked, holding his hands up in surrender. “N-No! I-It wasn’t me, I swear!”

“***THEN WHO DID?!***”

“I-It was a guest who visited here years ago!!” The rat stammered, sweat running down his forehead from both fear and the intense heat. “I don’t remember his name! Only that he wore a trench coat! I didn’t know about it until after the fact!”

Spyro didn’t believe him for one second. “***THEN WHY DID YOU LOCK HIM UP***

INSTEAD OF GETTING HIM HELP?! WHY HAVE YOU STARVED HIM ALL THESE YEARS?!"

"He was out of control! He attacked everyone like a rabid animal, even those who tried to feed him! What else was I supposed to do?!" The front of Gregory's shirt was starting to smolder. "I had to put the well-being of my guests first! But I never meant any harm beyond what was out of my control! I swear by my mother!"

Spyro glared at the trembling, sweating rodent, his flames roaring from his scales. It was obvious that he was lying; what Neko-Zombie had said contradicted Gregory's claims. And even if it was true, it didn't excuse the neglect. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to burn this wretched creature to ash; to punish him for all the wrongs he had no doubt done, not just to Neko-Zombie but to everyone he had harmed…

…but he didn't.

As it currently stood, he had no way of proving Gregory's words were false, as much as his gut was telling him otherwise. Nothing to go off of despite the words of two very twisted and very differing creatures. Not only that, but there were the Lost Souls he had to gather to think about; if they were under the imprisonment of dark magic in this house, and Gregory was the commander of this dark magic, then it could potentially spell doom for those under its control. Killing him could render the magic holding the souls together apart and send them forever plummeting into the abyss.

So, he would wait. For now.

Spyro closed his eyes to cool his fury, giving a deep, growling sigh; his raging fire of his body slowly cooled down until it was snuffed out entirely, plunging the room back into darkness, minus the glowing embers of the areas that had been scorched by the flames. He gave a gruff snort as he simply dropped Gregory to the ground; Gregory exclaimed in surprise as he tumbled backwards, landing on his back with a thud. The dragon glared down at him with utter contempt, his eyes still glowing a fiery orange.

He then turned his head towards Neko-Zombie's room; with a flash of fiery orange light, he fired what looked like a stream of flame and lightning mixed together, crackling openly with both elements, from his eyes at the door. The beam merged with the steel entirely, flowing across its front like a cascade of water, before being soaked up into the metal like a sponge. He continued to fire the beam for several seconds before closing his eyes, cutting it off and allowing it to disappear; the light faded from the door, leaving it as normal-looking at it did before.

"What did you do?!" Gregory asked, hesitantly reaching for the door. The moment his fingers drew close enough, the part that he was about to touch suddenly glowed a bright orange; a small stream of orange lightning then shot from the spot, zapping the old rat's hand with a

fierce bolt. “D-OUCH!!” He cried as he jerked his fingers back, the tips seared and smoking.

“***I infused that door with a drop of my essence.***” Spyro explained, glaring at him. “***To keep Neko-Zombie safe from you: so much as go near it, and it will strike you with my wrath.***” He snarled, showing his teeth. “***You will not lay another hand on him ever again.***”

“W-What? W-Why would you want to have anything to do with that horrid beast?” Gregory asked, still nursing his fingers. “He’s just a wretched cat! The enemy of the Rodentkin! Why risk your own reality fighting for such a lost cause?”

“***I will decide what is worth fighting for, not you.***” Spyro growled at him, lowering himself back down on all fours. He then began to turn away, intent on finding the kitchen (or whoever the Street Vendor was) for the promised chocolate. “***I will conclude my business in this hotel, and then I’m leaving. And when I do, I’m taking Neko-Zombie with me.***”

He then turned away and stormed off down the hall, eyes still glowing.

Gregory didn’t say anything; he simply waited until the dragon turned down the hall, waiting until the last of his long tail disappeared around the corner to the lobby, slithering like a giant snake through the air. Only after he was certain he had left did he bend down to scoop up the remains of his candle. In all the years that Gregory House had been standing, he had never encountered a soul of such ferocity, let alone one that had a power of his own.

This was going to be a difficult one, that was for certain.

He allowed himself a small chuckle, his trademark noise echoing through the hall.

But, if they were successful, it would all be worth it.